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Chicago Sinai, Chicago, IL

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Thank you for the invitation; for this extraordinarily gracious gesture. It is a singular honor. And thank you for being such a good neighbor to the Fourth Presbyterian Church. The relationship between Jewish Synagogue and the Presbyterian Church I was privileged to serve for 26 years was, and is, both unique and important: important strategically for both institutions, but also important for what it represents and models as a way of relationship between Jews and Christians

It began simply enough, with a phone call from Rabbi Howard Berman, making a request. You were located in Hyde Park but many of your members were living in this neighborhood and weren't fond of making the trek down Lake Shore Drive to Hyde Park on Friday evenings. Would it be possible, Rabbi Berman asked, for Sinai Congregation to hold Sabbath services in one of Fourth Presbyterian's worship spaces? The rest, as they say, is history. The Church Session agreed, the Sabbath services commenced on Friday evenings in the Church Chapel. And then, after a few months, came another phone call. We're liking your space and we were wondering if we could bring in some coffee and snacks and remain after the service and enjoy some fellowship. Again the Church agreed and Synagogue

members were spending more time in Fourth Presbyterian Church. Then came another call, a really important one. We're thinking of moving to your neighborhood, but real estate options are limited, as you know. There is no way we can build large enough to accommodate our High Holy Day observances. So, might it be possible, should we move, to use your main sanctuary two times in the fall, never on a Sunday, for our services? And I thought to myself – this is beginning to look like a romantic courtship – first we date, then have dinner, then we stay over, and then finally we get married. Is that where this is headed?

The wonderful new building was built on this site, High Holiday services commenced at Fourth Presbyterian Church and it seemed to work very well. Michael Sternfield was now your Rabbi and one of the wonderful byproducts has been a friendship that is both important and precious to me. Michael told me that things were going so well that Sinai members had identified their favorite pews and had become a little territorial and possessive—just like Presbyterians.

The relationship broadened. Michael and I invited other North Side clergy to meet with us and the result was an interfaith Thanksgiving service. Shared mission and education projects followed and your beautiful facility became one of the Fourth Presbyterian Church staff's favorite places for staff retreats.

When crises came, the relationship became even more important. After 9/11 we were able to organize quickly a community service of prayer and intercession—now with Holy Name Cathedral as a third partner. That event that was deeply meaningful and helpful. I will never forget Rabbi Sternfeld's prayer during that service at the end of which he invited all to participate by praying out loud- Christians the Lord's Payer and Jews the beautiful Kadish, the prayer for the dead. And our voices mingled in our holiest words and rose together to the one God of all of us.

When relations between Presbyterians and Jews became strained, nationally, following the Presbyterian Church's discussion of a proposal to divest from corporations doing business in Israel, in response to the plight of the Palestinian people (an effort that has not been successful, thankfully- from my perspective). Rabbi Sternfeld and I talked about what was happening and why, what it meant and what it didn't mean and the relationship between us became a model far and wide, of a respectful, civil, affectionate relationship between American Jews and Christians.

In terms of lasting impact for me was an evening conversation, sponsored by Synagogue and Church, with Rabbi Irving Greenberg. His book, For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: The New Encounter Between Judaism and Christianity, was reviewed favorably in The Christian Century, so I ordered

a copy and Greenberg knocked me out, saying things I had felt for years but for which I did not yet have words. I asked Rabbi Sternfeld if he knew Greenberg and he said he did, knew him well enough to use his nickname, “Yitz,” and suggested that we invite him to come to Chicago. We did and he came and people from our two congregations spent a fascination evening with him.

Greenberg has a big, expansive concept of God and God’s purpose. God’s “covenants of redemption”, Greenberg says, are for the purpose of Tikkun olan, healing the world, redeeming creation.

God’s Chosen People are chosen, he says, in order to make the Promised Land into a “microcosm of perfection,” a land in which economic equality, righteousness, justice, and equial treatment before the law will be the lot of everyone, citizen and stranger alike.

Greenberg discusses the relationship between Jews and Christians, which has so often been troublesome and frequently tragic, in terms that were new to for me and very provocative. “it was always God’s plan to bring the vision of redemption and the covenanted way to more of humanity.”

Someone had to bring the news to non-Jews that they were rooted in God also. He says it so eloquently, Id like to read what he says.

“The group that would bring the message of redemption to the rest of the nations had to grow out of the family and covenanted community of Israel. But the (new) community was not intended to be a replacement for Abraham’s family; nor were its adherents the proof of divine repudiation of Sarah’s Covenant (p. 221), Which, by the way is exactly what St. Paul says in the Letter to the Romans in the New Testament.

“The new articulation of the faith grew in the soil of Judaism. Christianity had to start within Judaism, but it had to grow into its own autonomous existence to preserve the particularity of the original.”

So, my being here this morning feels like visiting my family’s homestead. It is not my home now, but in a deep and profound sense it is where I came from.

We have skewed God’s plan, Greenberg proposes, Christian rejection of Judaism, is a distortion of Christianity: so too Judaism is distorted by an inability (refusal) to admit the vitality of the Christian religion and its contribution to meaning and ethics around the world.

Greenberg is also a charming man. In addition to taking my breath away with his expansive theology, he made me laugh by saying that if he’s around

when the Messiah comes, the first question he wants to ask is “is there any chance you’ve been here before?”

He says, and I believe, that “Jews and Christians, members of two faith communities remain part of one people, the people that wrestle with God and humans to bring them closer to one another.”

Beneath Rabbi Greenberg’s broad and inclusive thinking is an authentic theological modesty, an acknowledgement of the mystery of God, an acknowledgement that our most eloquent theology, our most eloquent liturgies, our most carefully reasoned ruled, and traditions and customs will never completely circumscribe or define the reality we call God.

We share a marvelous story about that from the early beginnings of our faith, and the faith we share. It’s in the 33rd chapter of the Book of Exodus. After leading the people out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, and into the wilderness, Moses is summoned to Mt. Sinai for a conference with God. God gives the Ten Commandments, Moses descends with the tablets under his arm, discovers the people worshipping a golden calf they have built. Moses smashes the golden calf and tablets, and now he’s back up the mountain to meet God again. What follows is not only delightful but profoundly important.

Given all that has happened to him, Moses makes a perfectly reasonable request: “Show me your glory…This leadership business is getting a little tricky..If you remember, I didn’t want to do it in the first place. So give me a little hard evidence that we’re on the right track here. Show me something, so I can know that all this is not a figment of my imagination…a little help, please, so that I can know for sure that you are real, and not – as some will suggest centuries later, a projection of my own insecurities and fears.”

A voice from the cloud says, “I will make my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name, but you cannot see my face.”

There are some things you cannot know, Moses.

And then God says the most amazing thing. “There is a place by me where you can stand upon the rock: and while my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will take away my hand and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen.”

Scholars who know more Hebrew than I do tell me that “back” is not quite it. It’s really “posterior, back side.”
So, why in the world does God’s man, chosen for this history-making project, not get a look at God’s face, the totality of God? Why in the world

does God place a hand over Moses to specifically prevent Moses from seeing too much?

Could it be that God doesn't want us to know everything there is to know? Could it be that God understands that when human beings conclude that they have the whole truth they begin to act badly towards those who do not share their confidence that they have the truth, sometimes conclude that they need to be eliminated– by converting them, persuading them, doing whatever is necessary to persuade them of the error of their ways because – remember – we're talking about Truth with a capital "T" here: so it's ok to use a little enhanced persuasion, torture perhaps, and if it all fails, maybe just got rid of them altogether – for their own good.

It is a good thing to know that you don't know everything.

An obscure Christian theologian, Nicholas of Cusa, five centuries ago came up with the concept of "Learned Ignorance." God, Nicholas wrote, "is the unknown infinite who dwells in light inaccessible. God's great gift to us is to know that we do not know."

St. Augustine said: "If you think you know, it isn't God."

And I can’t help but remember former Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, at a briefing on February 12, 2001, famously saying:

There are known knowns,
things we know we know.
There are known unknowns,
that is, we know there are some thing we do not know.
But there are also unknown unknowns,
the ones we don’t know we don’t know.

He was talking about military intelligence and national security, but he was also, at that moment, a pretty good Judeo-Christian theologian.

Wouldn’t it be something if religious leaders everywhere got together and issued a confession of Learned Ignorance; a humble, graceful act of theological modesty before the infinite mystery that is God: if they, we, all reexamined those exclusive truth claims that divide us and with disastrous frequency turn deadly violent.

There is an alternative way of knowing. Poet Wendell Berry calls it “knowing by cherishing, knowing by affection, knowing by heart.” The best of our life is like that. You cannot always understand love with your mind, your natural faculties, your senses. Biologists may suggest that human love

is nothing more than “hormones calling to hormones” but when you love someone deeply you know it is so much more, so very much more than that. No matter how erudite and sophisticated you are, your love for your beloved cannot be reduced to empirical evidence. For Valentine’s Day, I did not leave my wife a well thought-out list of reasons why I still love her, although that is not a bad idea, actually. Instead, I bought a mushy Valentine Card with three little colorful fuzz hearts that said: “You make me feel warm and fuzzy.” You cannot understand with your reason and senses a love that motivates a young Marine to cover a grenade with his body to save the lives of his buddies: or the love that keeps a man or woman loyally and faithfully standing with a beloved spouse after Alzheimer’s has done its damage.

You know love, Wendell Berry said, “by remembering and cherishing, and by the singing that is in your heart.”

What God wants from us, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, all of us – is not a religion that thinks it knows all the truth, and that builds high walls to keep everyone out. What God wants is a faith and love – love for God and for one another, which is the way God plans to continue redeeming creation, healing the world.

It has been one of the greatest privileges of my life to live and work, a Presbyterian Christian, alongside Jewish neighbors, my family, my brothers and sisters, in God’s great work of healing the world by showing in our life together, Jews and Christians, God’s great love for all.

Thanks be to God.